VICTORIAN SHADOWS AND PLATONIC LIGHT: ALLEGORY, IDENTITY, AND METAFICTION IN JOHN FOWLES'S *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

This study offers an interdisciplinary reading of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and examines the novel through the lens of Platonic allegory, with particular emphasis on the "Myth of the Cave," along with the concept of Socratic disruption embodied in the existential metamorphosis of the male protagonist. The central argument advanced herein is that the novel's male protagonist, Charles Smithson, represents a Victorian "cave-dweller" building his worldview on the premises confined by the rigid ideologies of class, determinism, and science. Sarah Woodruff, the uncanny female character, is portrayed as a Socratic catalyst of philosophical disturbance who forces Charles to explore and interrogate the illusions of his inherited belief so that he can gain insight into an authentic understanding of self and embark on a journey toward self-realization. A close textual reading unveils an underlying parallel between the gradual detachment of Charles, upon a Socratic shock, from societal norms and the allegorical transmission from darkness into light, thus posing the narrative as a dramatization of epistemological liberation. Furthermore, Fowles's metafictional narrative structure serves to seek truth, reflecting the instability of knowledge as well as the challenges of liberation from ideological confinement. By integrating the philosophy of the Classical period with modern narrative theory, this study contends a new perspective drawing on the interdisciplinary dialogue between philosophy and literature whereby it resituates *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) as a deeply philosophical meditation engaged with the crisis of identity, the ethics of liberty and the strenuous ascent toward intellectual emancipation.

Keywords: Victorian Ideology, Platonic Allegory, Socratic Method, Metafiction

INTRODUCTION

The French Lieutenant's Woman (1969) is a hallmark of postmodern fiction, exemplifying postmodern narrative through its innovative narrative techniques that subvert the traditional ones. Fowles's fiction resembles a literary Disney World and is described as a "protean amusement park" abundant in potential interpretation. However, it differs from the others in that it is dark and sinister, not Ferris wheel-lighted. Contrary to most amusement parks, the illusion becomes a reality within Fowles's fiction, central to which are two solid pilings comprised of his main themes, including "art and life" and "the aesthetic and the existential" (Palmer, 1974: 1-2). Representing a range of anti-modernist artistic strategies generated during the 1950s and developed remarkably in the 1960s, postmodernism is not one but several things. As contended by most American literary critics, postmodernism marks a departure from narrative and representation and embodies a shift to introspection and an engagement with self-reflection in the period identified with so-called metafiction, as can be traced in the works of some authors, amidst whom are Samuel Beckett, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, Donald Barthelme along with the Surfictionists and the *nouveau romanciers* whose main argument is that "postmodernism rediscovers and radicalizes the self-reflexive moment in an otherwise representational modernism," thus referring to a destination to radical aesthetic autonomy and pure formalism (Bertens, 1995: 3-4). As for imitating the styles, forms,

and other literary devices rooted in Victorian novels, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) exemplifies a historiographic metafiction; Fowles uses devices such as the conspicuous interventions staged by the narrator as well as the dual ending, thus exposing his work mainly not as a historical document but as fiction(Stephenson, 2007: 10). Interrupting the illusion of fiction on the ground of the twentieth-century references along with language he interpolates into the Victorian context, the author intermits the flow of the narrative and through a different voice, he articulates his critiques or commentaries (Duffy, 2009: 8). Whereas the novel depicts the ground of history in narrative, it posits itself as a work of 1960s it was authored in while referring critically to the turmoil in literature and society (Stephenson, 2007: 10). Fowles elucidates his view on this as follows:

"I write memoranda to myself about the book I'm on. On this one: *You are not not trying to write something one of the Victorian novelists forgot to write; but perhaps something one of them failed to write. And: Remember the etymology of the word: A novel is something new: It must have relevance to the writer's now-so don't ever pretend you live in 1867; or make sure the reader knows it's a pretence*" (*Notes on an Unfinished Novel*, Fowles, 1998: 15).

Offering a philosophical framework for this study, Plato transcends the Classical period and sheds light on how intellectual emancipation fulfills through his work employing the cave as a symbol representing the world of false beliefs, ignorance and illusion along with "shadows" serving as another symbol representing distorted information based on illusion and the sun standing for truth. Through the use of dramatic elements, Plato depicts his unprecedented competence in recreating the experience of conversation between authority figures such as Socrates and a significant number of other characters representative of certain types of readers as justified through Glaucon embodying a gifted and politically ambitious youth, in line with the purpose of dialogues aiming for inspiring and spurring readers to carry forward certain circles of thoughts (Meinwald, 2025). Comprised of the dialogue between Socrates and Plato's brother, Glaucon, Plato's *The Allegory of the Cave* (2010) presents a critical aspect of superficiality through the allegory of the cave, contending that human beings resemble the cave dwellers imprisoned in the dens and are not acquainted with outside the cave, standing for the constraints of the Victorian world. Plato's *The Allegory of the Cave* (2010) provides a philosophical framework to illuminate the epistemological liberation of Charles Smithson in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), which mediates transmission from the rigid ideological boundaries of the Victorian world into intellectual autonomy. Imprisoned in a dark den, the cave-dwellers can merely see shadows reflecting on the den's wall from the objects beyond which they cannot see. Deprived of the sight of the real objects, shadows serve as the entire reality for cave dwellers. One cave-dweller is released and finds out that the outside world is entirely different from the inside world they have been familiar with and notices that what forms their reality in the den is only illusions, shadows of the truth. Upon this enlightenment, he returns to the cave and attempts to convey what exists outside; however, he is rejected and ridiculed as the cave dwellers have not yet been acquainted with the outside world, namely the truth.

Platonic Allegory and the Cave

Representing a Victorian narrative authored from a distinct perspective of the twentieth century, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is an experimental novel resituating mid-Victorian characters as well as their attitudes on the grounds of the perspective of 1967. Through the technique and literary devices, including "imitation, adaptation, pastiche, parody, intentional anachronistic juxtapositions along with comment and intrusions," Fowles illustrates the thematic concerns associated with the Victorian era, such as changing social structures and the role of women in this, romance, arousal of challenging scientific theories, the role assigned to the omniscient author, authorial intrusion and use of epigraphs (Duffy, 2009:7). Through its idiosyncratic narrative framework-historiographic metafiction- *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) engages in a critique of Victorian realism through

the portrayal of the male protagonist, Charles Smithson, representing a Victorian cave-dweller imprisoned into the border of the Victorian era featuring determinism, rationalism, and harsh ideologies of class evident in the engagement of an aristocrat, Charles Smithson and Ernestina Freeman, the daughter of a wealthy family. Abide by the prescribed norms, Charles maintains life in alignment with the requirements of the Victorian era till Sarah's story appeals to him, marking a departure for him from the rigid norms shaken by the instability of the knowledge afterwards, thus subverting the stereotypes adopted submissively. In line with this, this study parallels the shadows on the den wall and the confinement perceptions of reality imprisoned within Victorian society, challenged by Platonic light aiming for enlightenment and higher truth.

The allegory in Platonic domain represents both a political and philosophical meaning. The den embodies the "narrow sphere of law and politics," and the light representing eternal ideas is deemed to serve as a disturbing influence on people freed from the den, and when they return, they cannot act in conformity with the inhabitants of the den. Hence, they are oppressed and derided by these cave dwellers. The ones emancipated from the cave gain insight into the things below through far truer proportions compared to those who have never ascended into the upper world (Plato, 1888: cxii). This contrast can be expressed on the reason as referred to by Socrates:

“And now let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened:—Behold! human beings living in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets” (Plato, 2010: 1).

Seemingly inspired by one of the pioneering novellas, Claire de Duras's *Ourika* (1823) (translated by Fowles), problematizing societal barriers a female protagonist is exposed to (Ingersoll, 1998:1), Fowles names the male protagonist “Charles” (Fowles, 1998: 53). Akin to the cave-dweller deprived of seeing what exists beyond the den and confined by the chains imprisioning him in the den, Charles Smithson is chained by the Victorian realism, hindering him from light but merely exposing to shadows. Afterwards, upon Sarah Woodruff’s role in his life as a Socratic catalyst, he is forced to question the basis of his identity and the assumptions about morality and truth. His new direction can be construed as a desire for “self-discovery” (x) and a revolt against the doctrines of Western rationalistic philosophy (ix), defined by Solomon (1974) as “existentialism.” It contributes to the deepening of individualism. Sartre (1947) denotes that “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself” (18) and Sarah is instrumental in his awakening and self-discovery.

Sarah Woodruff as a Socratic Catalyst

Sarah operates as a Socratic catalyst that can be described as the “heavenly messenger who voluntarily for the good of his fellow-men descends into the den” (Plato, 1888: cxiii). Sarah is identified with an uncanny ability to differentiate between the real and the fake, as articulated in the novel: "Without being able to say how, any more than a computer can explain its own processes, she saw them as they were and not as they tried to seem." Distinct from the other people of the period, she is described as a person "born with a computer in her heart," depicting the characteristics of the next century. She is gifted with the "instinctual profundity of insight," defined as the "curse of her life," along with her education, yet this is what induces unsettlement in Charles and the Victorian norms he pursues (Fowles, 1969: 57). Charles thinks objectively and deems Sarah to be a remarkable woman since he is overcome by a backwash from her wave of confession, challenging Charles's inherited social attitudes through her directness as well as complexity (177). In *Existentialism*, Sartre (1947) outlines the first move as a kind

of awareness: "…existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him" (19).

Within the philosophical framework of *The Allegory of the Cave* (2010), in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) Sarah Woodruff operates as Socratic catalyst igniting enlightenment that trigger an interrogative approach to the inherited beliefs, norms and stereotypes nourished by the Victorian realism. The novel reveals the challenge of liberation from ideological confinement and its influence on the character suffering from the anxiety caused by transformation:

"…it seemed to set Charles a choice; and while one part of him hated having to choose, we come near the secret of his state on that journey west when we know that another part of him felt intolerably excited by the proximity of the moment of choice. He had not the benefit of existentialist terminology; but what he felt was really a very clear case of the anxiety of freedom-that is the realization that one is free and the realization that being free is a situation of terror" (Fowles, 1969: 328).

What Charles experiences induced by the anxiety of freedom is similar to what a cave-dweller experiences following his liberation from the den, reinforcing that both transformation and adaptation are painful and enlightenment takes time, as illustrated in *The Allegory of the Cave*:

"At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows…" (Plato, 2010: 3).

Charles's Epistemological Liberation

The French Lieutenant's Woman elucidates the dialectic between Victorian society's oppressive, shadowy characteristics and the moments of revelation along with idealized understanding. Charles Smithson, the male protagonist, represents the archetype of a Victorian "cave-dweller" whose internal struggles are overwhelmed by societal constraints. Exploring the tension reflecting the controversy between social expectations and individual identity, the novel reveals the drawbacks of the harsh social structures in Victorian England. The cultural apparatus of Victorian society foregrounds its rigid conventions and iron certainties as Charles critiques his age owing to "its tumultous life, its iron certainties and rigid conventions, its repressed emotion and facetious humour, its cautious science and incautious religion, its corrupt politics and immutable castes, as the great hidden enemy of all his deepest yearnings" (Fowles, 1969: 349-350). He contends that he was deceived and delineates the age as "without love or freedom, without thought, without intention, without malice" (349-350). Charles's scientific interests in paleontology and geology and his liberal views, as mentioned through his support of the Liberal Party (21), are at odds with his social milieu. Furthermore, his internal struggle is nourished by the presence of Sarah Woodruff, who challenges him with her unprecedented profile, disrupting the typical figure of Victorian norms as aforementioned. Considerably distinct from others, Sarah has a profound influence on Charles, and in pursuit of his interrogation, he resituates her and deems her bright clothes represent her novel insight into "self," "self-possession," and "self-knowledge" (431). It is obvious that both the male and female protagonists cope with personal desires that do not dovetail with the societal norms of the period, paving the way for their self-discovery.

Charles Smithson is depicted to be undertaking an emotional, psychological and social quest or journey in the novel (Duffy, 2009: 9). His epistemological liberation from Victorian norms and his evolving awareness are catalyzed by Sarah, thanks to whom he commences to revise the inherited Victorian norms interrogatively upon his confronting Victorian hypocrisies, particularly in terms of morality and sexuality.

"He perceived that her directness of look was matched by a directness of thought and language-that what had on occasion struck him before as a presumption of intellectual equality (therefore a suspect

resentment against man) was less an equality than a proximity, a proximity like a nakedness, an intimacy of thought and feeling hitherto unimaginable to him in the context of a relationship with a woman" (Fowles, 1969: 177).

Charles ponders that Sarah's directness of look is in tandem with "a directness of thought and language," triggering him to reconsider Victorian dualities, as denoted by Fowles (1969): "… every Victorian had two minds" exemplified through the juxtaposition of "the principled man's cry for Universal Education" and "his terror of Universal Suffrage," and an avalanche of examples depicting the duality (354).

Sketching an outline to be a being of ascents, Platonism portrays a philosopher as the one who leaves the den and rises up (Deleuze, 1990: 127). Liberated from the chains, the cave and what he is surrounded by, a cave-dweller can explore the sun representing truth in *The Allegory of the Cave* (Plato, 2010):

"…he will be able to see the sun and not more reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is" (4). Likewise, Charles's emancipation from dualities and reflections of truth can realize through his intellectual emancipation from the cave of the Victorian world.

Metafiction and the Instability of Knowledge

Undermining the omniscient authority ascribed to the Victorian novelist, Fowles frames a narrator assigned with the role to interrupt the narrative and highlights it is merely fiction. The narrator poses a direct commentary and underscores the plot and characters emerge out of imagination: "I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind" (Fowles, 1969: 97) that can be construed as a depiction of the instability of knowledge in addition to a critique of the constraints imposed within the Victorian world, as reinforced also with appraisal of disobedience in the following lines:

"We know a world is an organism, not a machine. We also know that a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live " (Fowles, 1969: 98).

Drawing on Louis Hjelmslev's interrogative argument about the construction of the combinatorial and as parallel to his question, "What are the conditions that make it possible to articulate a given utterance as truth?", Lewis (1982) underscores that what the structuralist pays attention to is the generation of knowledge or truth effects rather than the knowledge itself (12-13). He denotes that possibility conditions are of great importance, questioning the principles of language and its aptitude for articulating and presenting facts or truth (17), that's why multiple endings are presented in the novel. The novel explicitly undercores that it is more likely to obtain more knowledge about somebody from the alterations and deletions rather than the published versions (Fowles, 1969: 354), consolidating that accessibility does not ensure truth of the knowledge Accordingly, freedom is of great importance to differentiate facts from pseudo facts and intellectual emancipation and autonomy are fundamental to liberate from constraints: "… to be free myself, I must give him, and Tina, and Sarah, even the abominable Mrs. Poulteney, their freedoms as well (Fowles, 1969: 98-99). The layered structure of narrators and fiction-makers, including Fowles, the narrator, his persona, Charles, and ultimately Sarah, reflects the novel's central themes of freedom versus power, and creation versus control (Hutcheon, 1988: 45). The narrator challenges the traditional novel and underscores the requirement for freedom from an omniscient God-like author (Duffy, 2009: 35). God is redefined as "the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist (Fowles, 1969: 98).

As for metafictional techniques, the readers are acquainted with the fictional characteristics of the narrative through Fowles's use of metafiction. The narrator operates as an interrupter intermittently,

foregrounding the constructed nature of the narrative, both the plot and characters. The narrator posits his argument highlighting it is unlikely to pursue fixed plans while writing novels and it is unpredictable how characters develop, consolidating that nothing is certain yet a representation of what is constructed:

"You may think novelists always have fixed plans to which they work, so that the future predicted by Chapter One is inexorably the actuality of Chapter Thirteen. But novelists write for countless different reasons: for money, for fame, for reviewers, for parents, for friends, for loved ones, for vanity, for pride, for curiosity, for amusement: as skilled furniture-makers enjoy making furniture, as drunkards like drinking, as judges like judging, as Sicilians like emptying a shotgun into an enemy's back. I could fill a book with reasons, and they would all be true, though not true of all. Only one same reason is shared by all of us: we wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is. Or was" (Fowles, 1969: 98).

Embodying how an author operates to nourish uncertainties and instabilities, Fowles presents different aspects so that he can avoid partaking in the turmoil:

"The only way I can take no part in the fight is to show two versions of it. That leaves me with only one problem: I cannot give both versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the 'real' version" (Fowles, 1969: 390).

This can be read as a common argument foregrounding the ambiguity as reinforced through the following excerpt: "In what way the brighter light is to dawn on the inhabitants of the lower world, or how the idea of good is to become the guiding principle of politics, is left unexplained by Plato" (Plato, 1888: cxiii).

CONCLUSION

Representing epistemological liberation, exceeding the confinements of the Victorian inheritage, what the male protagonist, Charles Smithson undergoes frames a sort of awakening triggering him to embark his journey to discover what exists beyond the "den" as used allegorically by Plato, and Sarah Woodruff operates as a Socratic Catalyst who lits the torch leading way to the enlightenment.

Delivering a philosophical inquiry for epistemological liberation, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is examined foregrounding the transformation of Charles Smithson within the framework of Plato's *The Allegory of the Cave* (2010) and the provocative force of Socratic inquiry instrumental in unraveling of identity. Cast as a Post-Victorian Socratic figure, Sarah Woodruff disrupts Charles's worldview, leading him to defy his assumptions and assert his agency through his choice for not being "in flight from the real reality"(Fowles, 1969: 99). She induces him to destabilize the inherited cinches within Victorian society, stirring arousal of a more authentic sense of self in him through a Socratic shock. Fowles's employment of metafiction is influential on this philosophical journey, accentuating the instability and fragility of knowledge and the challenge of liberation from ideological confinements. Through the intersection of classical philosophy rooted in Plato's work (*Republic*) and contemporary narrative techniques, this study construes the novel through a distinct lens and resituates it as a narrative of philosophical mediation on selfhood, liberation along with existential journey for intellectual autonomy.

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